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Newest spy charge adds to US-Iran strains

Iranian woman linked to CIA, including \$300 a month 'salary'

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Tehran, Iran
Iran's relations with the United States are likely to be still further strained by the latest twist in the lingering tale of the 50 American hostages being held by militant students here in Tehran.

Iran's pasdars (revolutionary guards) announced March 18 that they had arrested an Iranian Foreign Ministry official on spy charges. And the woman, Victoria Bassiri, was said to have assisted one of the American hostages, William Daugherty, in espionage operations both before the revolution against the Shah and after it.

The pasdars said that Ms. Bassiri had been arrested at the Foreign Ministry six days earlier. She is described as an Iranian Christian who was employed in the Foreign Ministry as an undersecretary. The specific charge against her was of "closely cooperating" with William Daugherty and passing on to him "secret and important documents" from the Iranian Foreign Ministry.

The guards said that Ms. Bassiri had received \$300 a month for her alleged undercover services, though receiving a salary of about 100,000 rials a month (nearly \$1,428 at the official rate) from the ministry.

A statement by the revolutionary guards said Mr. Daugherty was an agent of the US Central Intelligence Agency and was being held as a hostage in the US Embassy by the student militants. Mr. Daugherty's name has appeared previously with those of other alleged "CIA agents" whom the student militants have said they are holding.

Though sources close to Iran's Revolutionary Council have said previously that none of the hostages being held by the militants would be put on trial, observers here believe it almost certain that Mr. Daugherty will be taken before an Islamic revolutionary court when Ms. Bassiri is brought up for trial. This is likely to produce sharp reactions from the Carter administration, which has vigorously rejected the idea of any of the hostages being brought to trial.

Earlier this month Iranian Foreign Minister Sadeq Ghotbzadeh prevented a heightening of the US-Iran crisis by refusing to hand American diplomat Victor Tomseth to the revolutionary court. He was sought by the prosecutor to answer questions on alleged connections between the US Embassy and Iran's fanatical rightist "Forghan" terrorist group, some of whose members were being tried.

Mr. Tomseth, who had taken refuge in the Iranian Foreign Ministry in early November, along with charge d'affaires Bruce Laingen and another US diplomat, Michael Holland, had already been questioned by an official of the revolutionary court through an interpreter.

Even this procedure produced a strong reaction from the White House. And when revolutionary prosecutor general Ali Qoddussi demanded that Mr. Tomseth should be produced in court in person, Mr. Ghotbzadeh put his foot down.

But in Mr. Daugherty's case there would be nothing to prevent his being handed over to the revolutionary court to answer questions about his relationship with Ms. Bassiri.

Why this particular moment has been chosen to pick up Ms. Bassiri and why the arrest was only announced March 18 although it was made on March 12, two days before the majlis (national assembly) elections, puzzles observers here.

There is speculation that this may be the latest move by the powerful Islamic Republican Party, bastion of the religious fundamentalists, to win support for itself in the run-off majlis elections due in early April. Ayatollah Mousavi Khoeyni, the clerical mentor of the student militants in the embassy, is a leading Tehran candidate and an IRP member. Results of the March 14 first round of the majlis elections are still coming in. They indicate the IRP is holding the lead. But criticisms that it has been indulging in malpractices in the elections are widespread and continue to grow.

Iran's Revolutionary Council was scheduled to discuss the question of alleged malpractices, including vote rigging, late March 18. At time of writing it had not decided whether the entire elections should be canceled, as some are demanding, or whether the poll should be declared void only in areas where vote rigging and other malpractices have been proved.

The decision of the Revolutionary Council is doubly interesting because more than half of the council's members are believed to be members of the IRP.

It would obviously be of advantage to Mr. Bani-Sadr if results in areas where the IRP has won were to be canceled. Up to now, his group has been trailing the Islamic Republicans.